



THE FINDING OF IT

MATTY WAS SLOWLY WAKING UP as Amos nuzzled his cold nose into her face. Ryker still lay asleep at her feet, his red hair blowing in the cool breeze. The clouds were passing quickly over their resting place on Mole Hill, while the sun was starting to set on this early spring day.

They knew they weren't supposed to be here. The Mennonite man who owned the hill didn't like people wandering around on it because his cows grazed in this area. But it was a quiet place for the three friends, and they would often sneak away to look for volcanic rocks at the top. Today they had left the house after lunch. It was Saturday and they had spent the afternoon exploring the hill, and then had lain down for a nap. Mole Hill was the only volcano in this part of the country. It was a small hill

now, because erosion had worn it down over millions of years. A geologist once told them the volcano was dormant, but they often wondered what would happen if it erupted again.

Amos saw that Matty was now awake. He didn't sleep soundly when they were outdoors. It was his job to protect everyone—to be on the lookout for danger—and he knew it. So, he had been resting his nose on Matty's chest as she dozed, scanning the hillside for any movement.

Matty loved Amos. She had never known a time without her dog. He was nine years old—not so very fast anymore, but he could be fierce if he needed to be. Once when Matty and Ryker were hiking in the National Forest with their parents, they came around a bend and startled a bear eating berries. As always, Amos was at the front of the family pack. He stopped to let everyone know there was trouble. Perking up his ears, he began to growl deep in his throat—standing his ground to let the bear know not to come near. The bear didn't come near, but it didn't move away either, so Amos started barking ferociously and baring his teeth. The old bear finally got the idea that Amos meant business. Not wanting to fight an angry dog, the bear moved off the trail and down the hill. Amos followed it a short distance to make sure everything would be safe for his Matty and the rest of the family.

That's how Matty always felt with Amos—safe. She hugged him around the neck and kissed the top of his wet nose. “I love you Amos,” she said, then stretched her arms, yawned wide, and looked about the hill. “I guess

we'd better wake Ryker and look for some more rocks before it gets dark." The sun was getting lower in the sky, but they still had a few minutes before they would have to head back home. Matty stood up. Amos walked over to rouse Ryker.

Matty liked to scare her brother. She wasn't trying to be mean when she did it, but often an urge would overcome her and she'd try to scare the devil out of him.

"RYKER, WAKE UP!" Matty yelled. "I think the mountain is erupting!"

Now, normally this wouldn't have been a big deal. Ryker was used to this type of waking from his sister. However at this particular instant, Ryker was dreaming deeply about a roller blade hockey game. And this was no ordinary moment in his dream game. He was on the verge of scoring a goal *and* he saw that when he made the dream shot, he was going to be plowed down by a huge dream defender. Just as he got the shot off and made contact with the dream player, Matty yelled. At the same instant, Amos, who was a ready participant in Matty's pranks, pounced on Ryker. The sudden shock of an 85-pound dog landing on him, a dream defender smashing into him, and his sister's high-pitched alarm were enough to send him flying. His body, as if jolted by an electric wire, seemed to jump straight off the ground.

Matty loved every moment of this. Ryker grabbed wildly for anything he could and clenched Amos in a merciless bear-hug. Both went rolling down the hill. They were a large convulsing ball of screams and howls. The sheer

energy of the whole event made it one of the best scares ever. “It was,” as Matty would tell her mom later, “to die for.”

When the mass of skin and fur stopped rolling, Ryker jumped to his feet in a daze. It took him a few moments to figure out where he was and what had happened. “Matty, what the heck are you trying to do . . . kill me?” he asked angrily. Matty tried not to smile, but the laughter rolled out.

“I got you *soooooo* good this time Ryker Daniel,” she said. Ryker wanted to tackle her, but he knew Matty could hold her own with him. Matty was ten-and-a-half years old, and Ryker was just nine. Pretty soon he would be bigger than she was, but right now he didn’t want to wrestle her if he might get stomped. Ryker liked to win.

Amos, meanwhile, was picking thistle seeds off his front legs with his teeth. When thistles would get stuck in his long fur their dad would have to cut them out with scissors. Their dad didn’t seem to mind, though. He was glad the kids were out exploring with Amos instead of sitting in front of the TV or surfing the Internet.

“Come on, Ryker. I’ll race you to the top of the hill,” Matty said. Ryker took off instantly. He knew he could beat Matty if they started together—he was faster than she was—but he was starting down the hill a ways. She had an advantage over him. It was no surprise to him that Matty didn’t wait for him to get up to her. Matty liked to win too. As soon as they started, Amos decided he needed to stop his thistle picking and get to the front of the pack.

Amos passed Ryker, bumping him as he went by. It didn't take him long to get ahead of Matty and back at the head of the expedition. Amos knew they were heading to the stand of oaks at the top of the hill—their favorite place on the dormant volcano.

Amos reached the top far ahead of Matty and Ryker and started looking around for any sign of trouble. Ryker was gaining on Matty when they approached the oaks. He sure wanted to pounce on her as he got close, but pay-backs come in many forms. He knew winning the race after starting so far down the hill would really get to Matty. So he poured on the speed and blew past her.

As he came to the center of the oak stand, he leapt onto the rock formation that marked the top of the hill. He turned in Matty's direction and shouted, "The uncontested winner of the Mole Hill Sky Running Competition once again is . . . drum roll please! Prrrrrrrrrd . . . RYKER DANIEL ALDER." Matty was doing her best not to notice this show. She knew she deserved *some* retaliation, but her motto was, "Never acknowledge defeat!"

She walked over to Amos, who had seated himself next to a large white oak, and said, "Give me a high-five, Buddy." Amos threw his front paw up into her hand. "Yeah! We made it, Amos. What should we do now?"

"What should we do *now*?" Ryker said sarcastically. "You two should hail the Skyrunner."

"Oh give it a rest, Ryker, or I'll come up on that rock and thrash you," said Matty in an annoyed tone. "Let's look for some rocks, Amos," she said and turned away.

Ryker didn't push his victory any further. He knew he'd gotten her back for scaring him. So, he joined them to look for rocks. After a few minutes of searching, Ryker noticed that Amos had moved to the other side of his Sky-runner throne and was pretty interested in something. "What do you have there, Buddy?" he asked. Amos was digging next to an outcropping of rocks in some soft peaty soil. As Ryker came around the rocks, he saw that Amos had uncovered a fairly large fissure that led down into the ground. The soil had been covering the hole, so they had never seen it in their wanderings around the hill.

"What are you two doing over there?" asked Matty.

"Come over here, Matty, you've got to see this hole."

Matty came cautiously. She was never sure when Ryker was finished with his paybacks. He had a habit of faking truces. She saw Amos digging at the small fissure in the ground that seemed to go down a foot or more. Then Amos lengthened the hole to expose more of it.

"What has Amos got there?" she asked.

"I don't know. But his hair is bristling, so I'm betting it's something he's not sure about."

"Maybe it's a giant mole hole on Mole Hill," Matty joked.

"Amos would love to getta hold of the mole that could make a hole *that* big," Ryker said. "I bet you it's part of the old volcano pipe. A volcano *has* to have a vent pipe somewhere."

Amos continued to dig as if there were a bone in the hole. Matty and Ryker let him work at the soft soil for a few minutes. Dirt flew everywhere.

“So, who is going to give Amos a bath when we get home?” Ryker asked.

“He’s your dog. Remember how you two were playing *cuddles* a few minutes ago?” Matty said in a drippy tone. Matty wasn’t one for giving up so easily on paybacks herself.

Ryker said, “You’re gonna get it if you don’t watch it, Sis. . . . Hey, what’s he got there?”

Amos had stopped digging and was pulling something up from deep in the fissure. It was long and he had to back away from the hole to get it out. Once it was out of the hole, Amos quickly ran a few feet away to enjoy his find. “What is it Matty? A bone?”

“I don’t know, but we’d better see what it is. We don’t want him eating anything gross!”

Ryker walked over to Amos and scratched the fuzzy spot behind his ear. He leaned down and pulled the long object out of Amos’ mouth and out from under his body. (Amos had the habit of lying on big bones as he chewed them. This made it harder for someone to take the bone away from him.)

“Look at this Matty, it’s a weird stick,” said Ryker.

“It’s really shaped strangely, and look at those colors,” said Matty.

Matty took the stick from Ryker’s hand and ran her fingers over it. It was about 30-inches long and polished

smooth like a piece of driftwood. It was as thick as two of Matty's fingers put together, and it curved back and forth down its length.

"It reminds me of Miss Anne's little bush. What does she call that thing, Ryker?"

"It's not a bush. It's a Harry Lauder tree. Remember he was the Scottish guy with a crooked cane," Ryker told her.

"Well, whatever. The tree looks like a bush, and this stick looks like the tree."

She turned the stick around in her hands like a drill and enjoyed the feel of the corkscrewing action. The bark was all gone and two colors of wood intermingled: one red and another light cream. "This looks like a pine tree mixed up with one of those manzanita trees we saw in California," said Matty.

Amos was near Matty. He wanted his stick back. He had been watching it closely ever since Ryker had wrestled it from him. He grabbed one end of the stick in his mouth and began a tug-of-war with Matty. "No, Amos!" she said. "Stop it!" Amos dropped the stick and gave a bark. "What's up with you?" she asked.

Ryker, meanwhile, had resumed his search for rocks and was looking around the fissure. "Matty, we better get going soon. Mom told us not to be late. We're going over to Miss Sue's and Miss Anne's for dinner, and the sun's dropping."

Matty said, "All right. We can head back. It will take us a while to get home. Let's go down the far side of the

hill through the little path then we can cut over to Silver Lake and on into town.”

“Okay, but I’m leading the way. Are you keeping that stick Amos found?” he asked.

“Yeh. I don’t know what I’ll do with it. It’s not long enough for a walking stick. But it feels nice in my hand,” she said. “Anyhow, we’d better get going.”

They walked at a good pace down one of the cow paths on the hill. Amos was blazing the trail followed by Ryker and then Matty. Matty was waving the stick behind her like a whip antenna, whacking the ground with it every so often. Something behind them darted off into the undergrowth. In an instant, Amos turned off the trail and headed back up the hill after it. “Amos,” Ryker called loudly. “Come on, Buddy. We don’t have time to chase squirrels now. AAAAAMOOOOSSS, COME ONNNN.” He and Matty kept walking down the path. They couldn’t hear Amos, but knew he would catch up.

It was getting darker as they walked. The shadows were lengthening. The sun was already out of view on this side of the hill as they walked. They heard Amos running full speed to catch up and get in the lead. Then they heard a THUMP. It sounded like Amos had taken a header onto the ground.

“Amos! Come on, friend,” yelled Matty.

Amos had been running full speed down the path. He knew every turn, every rock and bush. Cows roamed up and down this path, and Amos would mark prominent obstacles. This let the cows know he had been around and

it also gave him a sure roadmap of his travels. But something was not right, for as he was racing down the hill in the shadows he ran smack into a young sapling in the middle of the path. The sapling stopped him cold, knocking the wind out of him. He got up and sniffed the small tree. He had never marked this one. He circled it and stared as if thinking: *How had I missed this before? It's in the middle of the path.*

He was falling behind and didn't have time to waste. He quickly sniffed the sapling again, lifted his leg, and marked it. In a flash he was off, then back at the lead of the pack, looking for danger.